

DIAKONIA CONSULTATION

JOINING FORCES TO MEET THE SOCIAL CHALLENGES OF THE DURBAN AREA.

Assumption Hall: 19 March, 1975.

Some weeks ago our newspapers were full of the Villa Road controversy. The Villa Road controversy centred around a decision of the Durban City Council to expropriate a certain number of private owners in Sparks Estate in order to provide sites for flat development.

On the 14th March, Mr. Val Volker, M.P. was reported in the Daily News as saying that he was not in favour of the hostel development for African male workers at Umlazi.

On the 16 March, the Sunday Tribune carried a long article by Linda Vergnani on the adverse conditions affecting African school children.

To these three issues could be added an almost interminable litany of other issues. In each case a human problem is involved, a problem resulting in distress, insecurity, social disruption, frustration, distortion and stunting of human life. There is a human need calling out for a solution, or at least for compassionate understanding and the beginning of a solution.

We turn from this picture of human distress and human need and we read in the Gospel: "For I was hungry and you never gave me food; I was thirsty and you never gave me anything to drink; I was a stranger and you never made me welcome, naked and you never clothed me, sick and in prison and you never visited me". Then it will be their turn to ask: "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or naked, sick or in prison, and did not come to your help?". Then he will answer; "I tell you solemnly, insofar as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me".

Confronting the human situations of distress with the Gospel, we may be tempted to say: "I do my little bit to feed the hungry, and give drink to the thirsty and take care of others in need, but I cannot be expected to face up to all the problems that surround me. They are too many, they are too huge, they are beyond my puny efforts. I haven't got the time and the means". That is true. None of us have the time or the means. We are talking about social problems, not isolated cases of hunger and thirst or sickness, but conditions of distress common to communities, common even to great masses of people. What can we poor individuals do about these situations? Almost nothing.

And because we poor individuals make up the Church, together as the Church we can do almost nothing. There seems to be something wrong here and that realisation of something being wrong is the reason for our being here.

We all believe, I think, that the primary concern of the Church is with word and worship, but we all believe, too, that that word and worship of the Church remain empty formulas unless they overflow into Christian living, Christian action, Christian love. This is so obvious that it hardly needs stating.

Concern for human need has always characterised true Christianity, both in the individual and the community. Hence the magnificent history of Christian involvement in education, development and welfare.

But we have come nowhere near solving the great problem of human need. The poor are always with us, and perhaps more than ever in our age - age of revolution, discovery, technology, exploitation, confrontation and conflict.

It is against this background that I am proposing the launching of DIAKONIA, as an endeavour to sensitize the Church in one small geographical area to a keener sense of corporate responsibility and a deeper corporate involvement in social problems. These few words of introduction to our consultation take the form of a commentary on Article 2 of the Draft Constitution.

In this article the purpose of DIAKONIA is described as "activating their concern (that is, the concern of member Churches, or parts of Churches), in the social field and focussing this concern on problem situations and on welfare and development projects".

It is clear from this formulation that it is not intended that DIAKONIA should be an agency acting on behalf of Churches in some particular field of activity, an agency to which the Churches give a mandate to do something in the social field on their behalf. In this it differs from Inter-Church Aid which is an agency acting on behalf of the Church in channelling aid to development projects. The primary aim of DIAKONIA is to activate the concern of Churches, Church groups, Church members, in order that they may get involved as far as possible.

Article 2 goes on to say in paragraph (c) that DIAKONIA shall endeavour to achieve its purpose "by gathering and disseminating information, by taking action designed to activate the concern of member Churches, and by collaborating with organisations with similar objectives".

This paragraph, by providing for action and collaboration, may appear at first sight to detract from DIAKONIA's primary aim of activating the concern of the Churches. It may appear to set DIAKONIA up as an agency for action on behalf of the Churches. This impression must be corrected by focussing attention on the phrase "by taking action designed to activate the concern of member Churches". This means that whatever action is taken (and action obviously cannot be avoided, because actions speak louder than words), that action must never lose sight of the need to keep the Churches fully involved through shared decision and shared activity. A vigorous and effective DIAKONIA that would scarcely touch the lives of Christian congregations and their members would be a failure.

How can DIAKONIA guard against going off on its own and leaving the Churches untouched by its concern and activities? Only by constant review, by regular self-examination of its success or otherwise in activating the social conscience of the member Churches. Perhaps we should include a provision in the Constitution to the effect that the article on the purpose of DIAKONIA be read and commented on at every annual general meeting.

Two other very important duties envisaged for DIAKONIA are "gathering and disseminating information". In a way the gathering and disseminating of information could be considered

DIAKONIA's most important task, provided as much emphasis is placed on disseminating as on gathering. It is easy enough to come by information particularly as there are so many other bodies that one can turn to, like the Institute of Race Relations and University faculties and institutes. Information can be collected and filed and the DIAKONIA office could become a veritable store-house of it, at the disposal of the Churches and other interested bodies. The problem is dissemination, communication - getting it to the Churches and other interested bodies in an effective manner. This is a point that must be reviewed continually: is DIAKONIA really communicating?

It is important, too, that DIAKONIA be able to communicate not only problems, but solutions. It would be most desirable that, if people turned to DIAKONIA with a problem, they could be put in touch with others who are already dealing with a similar problem or are able to offer expert guidance and advice. This would apply to many situations in townships where people are struggling with innumerable problems of urban life, which can ultimately be solved only by firm and vigorous efforts at community development. To find out where and how to acquire knowledge, and skill, is very important.

This leads me to deal with the phrase: "concern in the social field". This phrase has a very broad connotation. Concern in the social field can apply to a great multiplicity of situations and these situations can be grouped roughly under three categories: welfare, development and liberation. I say "grouped roughly" because the categories overlap. People concerned with welfare say the only way to deal effectively with welfare problems is to endeavour to get those affected by them involved in their own salvation, and this, in a certain sense, is development, community development. Again development is often held up because of social, economic and political handicaps. To work for the removal of these is liberation. Liberation can be violent or peaceful. It goes without saying that the only kind of liberation we have in mind is the peaceful kind.

Obviously no single organisation can get itself involved in any great number of welfare, development or liberation issues. It must set limits to what it can do effectively. The Draft Constitution provides that any problem in the social field can be dealt with by DIAKONIA. It is up to its governing body to decide what issues it can deal with most effectively in activating the social concern of the Churches.

That is all I wish to say by way of introduction. I hope my few words have given you some understanding of what I envisage by DIAKONIA and its essential purpose as described in the draft constitution. You may not agree that such an agency is necessary, in which case this will be our first and last discussion of the subject. If you agree that DIAKONIA has place in the life of the Churches we can go on to discuss the details, and very formidable details they are, especially in regard to procedure for seeking consensus on policy and in regard to personnel and finance.

The hope has been expressed that agreement can be reached on all the main issues by June 30 of this year. That would be a great achievement. The launching of DIAKONIA as an agency to activate the social conscience of the Churches, would, I think, constitute an appreciable step forward in promoting the witness of the Churches' concern for human need, ecumenical co-operation and last, but not least, the very credibility of the Churches themselves in their preaching of the Gospel of love.